

Feet First Into Hell

by PLC Cmdr.Hotshot13

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Summary: The ODST are the elite of the Marines. So when Covenant forces overwhelm the human colony world Tirth, can the Helljumpers manage to prevent valuable A.I.'s holding the coordinates to Earth from falling into Covenant hands?

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Prologue

Several months before the Battle of Reach

"Damn it, watch the right!"

"We need a Jackhammer up here now, we've got Banshees inbound!"

"Steady, don't fire too early, steady!"

"Where's our air support?"

Battle chatter disrupted the comm channels, and Sergeant Jason Recks grimaced. He shut off the buzzing earpiece violently; there was no point in vain efforts to restore command orders over the men as of now. Not that any orders would do much of anything right now anyway. There was no order that could save the battle, no order that could preserve more than half of the Marine force holding out here, on the human colony world Tirth. Tirth was one of the less well-known worlds colonized by Earth before the Covenant had attacked. Now it was a battlefield.

Switching the comm unit back on, he listened to the distressed cries of the Marines holding out on the line, probably the right flank. They were screaming for backup, screaming like babies, though Recks knew that these soldiers were some of the most hardened men ever

fighting such a war. There was no backup that could prevent many good men from dying this day, could preserve Tirth from the Covenant hordes.

There was a screaming roar, and Recks threw himself onto the ground. A Covenant Banshee shrieked by, plasma cannons digging rivets into the hard clods of dirt on the ground. It circled the clearing where the command team was set up once, then, as it started to come around again, somebody got a bead on it with a Jackhammer and blew it out of the sky. The flaming hulk fell to the ground, and a scorched Elite clawed his way out of the wreckage. Twenty some projectiles dug their way into his body before he realized where he was.

Recks threw open the command channel on the comm, picking himself up off the ground. He overrode all signals with his command frequency, injecting gruffness into his voice.

"Listen up people! Platoons Three and Four fall back to the inner defensive ring. Platoons Two and Five give cover, then fall back."

"Sir, platoon Five is gone!"

Recks shook his head. "I don't care! Do it now or it'll be me getting your head soldier, not those damn aliens!"

The command team heard the order too, and they began disassembling long range comm equipment and defensive coordination A.I. systems. The inner defensive ring was just beyond the trees in this clearing, and if the Covenant suddenly broke through they would risk compromising their A.I.s and equipment. They would retreat to another location a few kliks east of here. The remnants of the Seventh marines was fighting their way back across the landscape of Tirth, trying to damage the Covenant enough that their advance would halt, giving time for whatever was left of the bombed-out Gamma Base to escape. The idea was for the Seventh to be pulled out on the last ship out, the Fiery Justice, along with the staff from Gamma Base. Recks knew it wouldn't happen.

The command staff was mostly out by now, though the last few techies were scrambling away like moths from the light. The sounds of battle were approaching from the woods now, and Recks began to jog toward them, intent on making sure his men held at the line. Hefting his assault rifle, he broke though the first rank of trees and almost right on top of the trench dug along the length of the clearing. Most of platoons Three and Four were there, and Two was coming back through the scattering of trees now. Behind them raced several dozen Elites on Ghosts, as well as a barely visible rank of Grunts emerging from the haze in the distance.

The men of Two platoon were beat- Recks could see that from here- but the Ghost riders were intent on hounding them all the way into the defensive line. Recks was confident on making them regret that decision.

"Snipers! Start taking targets on the Ghosts. Clean shots only- we don't want to hurt our boys out there with fire from two directions." The troops in the trench armed with sniper weapons began firing in scattered pops. "The rest of you, wait for the signal! Fire for effect!"

The marines could see that the Ghosts and their heavy plasma cannons were almost on top of them, however they were hardened soldiers and obeyed. Every man in the trench capable of lifting a weapon did, pointing some hundred barrels down range.

Then Two platoon was among them, around them, leaping into the pit and taking cover. But so were the Ghosts. Plasma bolts heated up the air around them, disturbed the dirt in great sprays. Recks managed to grit out one word among the chaos:

"FIRE!"

The Ghost riders bucked back in their seats, taken by surprise by the volley from the seemingly beaten troops. Toppling from their seats, gore streaming from their helmets, they fell off the Ghosts which continued on, riderless, over the heads of the men hunched down in the trench. The second wave faltered, seeing what had happened to their comrades. But the marines didn't pause. Systematically they blasted each Elite out of his saddle, a projectile in his chest. It only took a few rounds from each of them to send the survivors of the cavalry charge scrambling off. They had long faded into the fog when the men on the line started to relax, to shout joyfully. It rose up into one great chorus of cheering voices, and Recks found himself taking up the cry too, even though his clip was still full, to his momentary embarrassment.

But the fog behind which the Ghosts had run started to swirl unnervingly, boiling as though it could not bear to hold whatever it had in its mouth there any longer. Recks couldn't blame it when he saw what emerged. A line of Grunts, no two lines, no three. But the ranks continued, and continued. The cheering died off, and the men stared in mute, sick fear as the Grunts continued to swell in numbers. Then, the ranks stopped, and an Elite emerged, then more Grunts, then an Elite. There was a roar, a terrible screaming noise, and off to one side several Hunters crouched, ready to attack. The whole procession halted for one moment, staring back at the marines. The silence held for just a second, then Recks finally broke the spell.

"Blast E'm!"

The Grunts screamed their high-pitched yell and surged forward. The Hunters prowled in from the sides. One of them neared the trench and someone put a Jackhammer missile into its stomach, bowling it back where it writhed around and died. Its partner screamed in rage and charged into the line, tearing several burly marines into ragged, bloody shreds before it was finally brought down.

Recks turned to the incoming horde of Grunts, and added his fire to the streams pouring out, mowing the stupid animals down in waves. He no sooner had dropped one than another entered his brackets, then another and another. The target rich environment excited the marines into fighting better, emptying their guns then going hand to hand, dragging down five others in mad ferocity before being overwhelmed by the plasma rounds. Recks was dimly aware that the line was being broken, the Grunts were here in too much force. He watched them come on only to be slaughtered. And he watched the Elites, just out of range, watching calmly, uncaringly as they sacrificed hundreds of their menial workers. And he felt terrible anger welling up in him.

That they would stand there, superior, and allow these poor animals to die in such appalling masses for no reason? Any other strategy would have worked just as well- Recks knew himself of several different ways the enemy could have exploited his weaknesses and broke the back of the entire marine force. But instead they chose speed, not feeling any remorse for the replaceable fools killed here. Recks felt a hot, burning anger in his gut, sick with the realization of it. Then he snapped.

He rose from the line, dimly aware of his own actions, seen as though through a red haze. He shouldered past Grunts, crushing the skulls of those that proved dangerous with the butt of his rifle. He went a hundred yards before the plasma blasts began to hit him, grazing his skin just enough to hurt agonizingly, but he pushed on. Somewhere, he stumbled, for the pain was so great, but then he felt nothing, the haze took command of his body, and he struggled on. He was past the Grunts now, almost to the blue-armored Elite standing coolly directing the battle. A Hunter stepped into his path, but he scooped a plasma grenade off the ground and shoved it deep into the astounded Hunter's stomach, where it exploded. He briefly felt another plasma burn, and looked curiously at the hand that had been holding the plasma grenade. It was a pulsing red stump. He thought somewhere in the back of his mind that that was bad, but the haze took command, and he forgot it, staggering forward in a half-run, finally reaching the Elite. He drew back his arm, snagging a concussion grenade off his chest, preparing to arm it and kill the Elite as he came within a foot of the vile creature. It stood there, still calmly watching him.

The Elite watched the human, watched his harrowing journey, and wondered vaguely just how anyone could survive his ordeal. No matter. Then as the human staggered to him, preparing to arm a grenade, he reached out coolly and, claws extended, slapped him aside. He twitched on the ground for a moment, then lay still. What a peculiar thing, though the Elite. Such a warrior. Valor uncommon in most humans, something to be admired. But his pathetic attempts could not even come close to matching the true skill of the great Covenant warrior. His mandibles opened in an approximation of a grin. Foolish creature. They had lost from the moment they had begun to fight.

Then the concussion grenade, pressed tightly to Sergeant Jason Reck's cold chest, exploded. And the Elite felt no more.

End
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